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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews two areas of limitations concerning college outcome assessments and argues that while cognitive outcomes may be effectively measured during the students' academic careers, the perceptions of alumni are a necessary component of the assessment of affective outcomes. The limitations that are addressed concern first, determining what outcomes are to be assessed, and second, deciding who to assess (current students or alumni). Both the theoretical aspects of college outcomes assessment and the application of the assessment method are discussed. The theoretical section addresses the nature of cognitive and affective objectives and the appropriate role of students and alumni in the assessment of these outcomes. The applied section makes reference to the assessment method assumed by an outcomes study undertaken during the 1980s by 13 church-related colleges in determining the achievement of affective outcomes as measured by the perceptions of over 3,000 alumni. Attention is focused on the method of assessment rather than on an analysis of study results. Contains 15 references. (GLR)

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THE ROLE OF ALUMNI IN THE ASSESSMENT OF AFFECTIVE OUTCOMES

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The values and attitudes which will characterize American society in the future depend, in part, on the kind of people the students in today's institutions of higher learning become. Consequently, it is important for colleges to frequently ascertain the extent to which they are effecting the various developmental objectives associated with the learning and teaching context. This is an endeavor which goes to the heart of the educational enterprise: As educators do we accomplish the outcomes for which higher education is responsible?

While outcomes assessment has been part of higher education for numerous decades, the recent increased attention to the study of educational outcomes is due primarily to the new vigor with which the academy's various constituencies are holding it accountable. As Peter Ewell has noted, "across the country, powerful voices have begun clamoring for institutional accountability in higher education, accountability based on measuring 'objective' outcomes."[1] These voices have arisen as a result of both a concern within colleges and universities themselves as well as from pressure placed on them by the public at-large. The concern calls upon the educational institution to

prove itself as a valuable and worthwhile enterprise.

All assessment efforts are, by their very nature, limited in particular ways. The researcher must minimally determine what outcomes are to be assessed and on what specific constituency of higher education these outcomes will be measured. My intention in this paper is to review these two areas of limitation, and through doing so, to argue that while cognitive outcomes may be effectively measured during the students' academic careers, the perceptions of alumni are a necessary component of the assessment of affective outcomes.

This thesis will be developed in both theoretical and applied sections of the paper. In the theoretical component, the issues addressed include the nature of cognitive and affective objectives and the appropriate role of students and alumni in the assessment of these outcomes. In the applied section, reference is made to the assessment method assumed by an outcomes study undertaken during the 1980s by thirteen church-related colleges in determining the achievement of affective outcomes as measured by the perceptions of over 3000 alumni. Attention in this section is focused on the method of assessment rather than on an analysis of the findings of the study.

WHAT DO WE ASSESS?

A cursory reading of a random selection of statements of philosophy printed near the beginning of most college catalogs will indicate that as institutions of higher

learning we expect to accomplish a variety of student outcomes. Not only do we want our students to have depth of knowledge in at least one field, we also require that they be broadly informed in a variety of disciplines. Not only do we expect to teach our students to be concerned with physical fitness and recreative use of their leisure time, we also desire to advance their aesthetic responsiveness and discernment. Not only do we endeavor to assist our students in obtaining the prerequisites for vocational competence, we also seek to cultivate their avocational interests and skills. Not only do we posit the goal of developing in our students a deep sense of ethical and social concern, we also assume the responsibility for facilitating their adjustment to the stresses inherent in life. Not only do we wish to help our students recognize that learning is a life-long process and equip them to be able to pursue this process independently, we also hope to lay the foundation for their ongoing physical, spiritual, social, and emotional health.

Colleges and universities expect to affect students in a wide variety of ways. What we expect to accomplish in the life of our students is a series of diverse and, at times, self-contradictory expectations. Given the nature of our mission we must repeatedly ask whether the successful fulfillment of these glowing expectations is documented in the lives of our students and alumni.

Any single assessment effort cannot assume the responsibility to examine all of these outcomes. It is best to group them into selected categories or typologies and to assess them accordingly, through methods and instruments designed specifically for these purposes.

One of the most familiar ways of doing this is the taxonomy in which outcomes are categorized as either cognitive or affective.[2] Alexander Astin explains that "cognitive measures have to do with behavior that requires the use of high order mental processes such as reasoning and logic; affective measures deal with behavior that relates to the student's attitudes, feelings, and personality."[3] Cognitive outcomes, thus, concern the acquisition of formal knowledge, the level of academic achievement, the refinement of critical thinking skills, and the development of vocational skills. Affective outcomes include the development of self-concept, values, and beliefs, as well as a concern for avocations, satisfactory mental health, participatory citizenship, and fulfilled interpersonal relationships.

Another frequently cited classification of outcomes dimensions is that suggested by Peter Ewell.[4] He maintains that assessment should concentrate on three areas--knowledge, skills, and attitudes/values--followed by a fourth category dealing with the students' relationships with the larger society. The first two of these are similar to Astin's cognitive designation, while Ewell's third group is similar to what Astin describes as affective outcomes.

Cognitive outcomes, or those related to knowledge and skills, are most often associated with the curriculum and the classroom as the explicit context for teaching and learning. These objectives serve as a significant part of the rationale for general education and also influence the manner in which certain parts of major programs are designed. Thus cognitive outcomes are often associated with speaking and writing in a clear, correct, and effective manner; with critical and quantitative thinking and

reasoning skills; with intellectual growth in a variety of academic disciplines; and with preparation for employment in a specific vocational or professional area.

By contrast, affective outcomes, or those most directed at attitudes and values, are generally associated with a cross-section of campus experiences. In this sense they are more difficult to define, categorize, and measure. They include aspects of individual growth in the areas of aesthetics, morality, social adaptability, personal development, and spirituality.

Over a decade ago, in his landmark study Investment in Learning, Howard Bowen maintained that the fulfillment of both cognitive and affective outcomes has a positive effect on both the individual students and society-at-large. His research suggested that "college education significantly raises the level of knowledge, the intellectual disposition, and the cognitive power of its students."[5] Furthermore, in the affective realm, Bowen concluded that college education helps students to develop personal identity, psychological well-being, increased tolerance toward other ethnic groups and "practical competence . . . as citizens, workers, family members, and consumers."[6]

Since the various types of outcomes differ significantly it is usually preferable for the researcher to concentrate on a single type, rather than studying all of them together. Part of this is due to the distinctive features of the various outcomes, but much of it relates to the question concerning which of the constituencies of higher education is best able to assess the level of success we have had in attaining each of the proposed outcomes.

WHOM DO WE ASSESS?

Outcomes assessment is generally accomplished through information gathered from either currently enrolled students or alumni. The majority of assessment activities are based on measurements undertaken during the students' college years. The goal of student-based studies is to investigate whether or not "students, regardless of who they are or where they go to college, typically change in definable ways during their undergraduate years."[7] When currently enrolled students are utilized to measure outcomes, the most popular method of measurement makes use of a freshman pre-test and senior post-test instrument. This methodology is appropriate for studies measuring cognitive outcomes and can also be used to measure certain affective outcomes.

Among the significant shortcomings of this methodology, however, particularly in its adaptation to affective studies, concerns the failure to distinguish between college-based developmental influences and the developmental impetus students receive over the course of their years in college which comes from sources other than the college experience per se. In addition, the pre-test/post-test method does not allow for those changes which are based on a normal maturation process, those which would have occurred regardless of whether or not the individual studied at the undergraduate level.[8]

The use of alumni as a data base for outcomes studies is less popular than assessment via currently enrolled students. Of the many outcomes studies reviewed by Feldman and Newcomb[9] research with alumni was limited to the degree of persistence of college-incurred changes. No study was reviewed which was designed to discover

precisely what these changes were, nor, more specifically, to what extent the college experience had influenced said changes. Robert Pace[10] has suggested that historically there have been occasional alumni-based studies, but asserts that these have generally tended to be poorly organized and limited in their orientation.

Alumni-based outcomes assessment is important for at least four reasons. First it provides the opportunity for "detached objectivity." When students are the source of assessment their perspective is often limited due to the immediacy of the college environment. When alumni participate in assessment activities their measurement of outcomes is often more reflective, given their distance from the college setting, both geographically and temporally.

Second, alumni-based outcomes assessment is useful because it can effectively measure the perceptions of the participants. Perceptions are an important component in affective outcomes assessment. This type of research does not measure concrete actions, as is the case when the number of active registered voters are understood to be a measure of responsible citizenship. Rather, alumni-based research can ask for the graduate's perception concerning the extent to which the undergraduate experience cultivated responsible citizenship, however it may be objectively expressed in the individual's life. Both Robert Pace and Peter Ewell assert that there is a positive correlation between a graduate's perception and actual levels of achievement.[11]

Third, this type of assessment permits alumni to differentiate between developmental outcomes which were the result of the undergraduate experience and environment and those which were promoted principally through contributing forces

beyond the educational setting. While the graduates' ability to distinguish between these two is not nearly absolute, the measurement of their perceptions in this regard is, nonetheless, a valuable source of outcomes data for the college or university.

Finally, while those assessment endeavors which measure currently enrolled students focus on short-term outcomes alumni-based research provides an appropriate context within which to measure long-term objectives. Assessment on this level is important as many of higher education's objectives apply not only to the student but to the individual throughout life. And, as Peter Ewell has noted, "assessment and communication of long-term objectives . . . probably has the greatest potential for influencing public perception of the value of higher education as a whole."[12]

If what we have asserted is correct then we must ask why assessment efforts do not more frequently include alumni. Certainly, currently enrolled students are more accessible to researchers, but convenience of accessibility should not overly restrict significant outcomes assessment. Periodic assessment efforts should ask how alumni who are five, ten, fifteen, or twenty years removed from their undergraduate studies perceive the influence of their college experience on their life. As Robert Pace has suggested, "I should think one would want to know how college graduates evaluate their own educational experience and how they view higher education as a social institution."[13] Alumni provide the bottom line for the academy. How satisfied are alumni with their undergraduate experience once they have had some reasonable time to live with the results of their education and reflect upon it?

Cognitive outcomes, particularly those which concern intellectual development, are well measured throughout the students' academic careers. The persistence of cognitive outcomes and the fulfillment of vocationally oriented outcomes are best measured through alumni-based studies. When affective outcomes are to be measured the matured and detached perspective of alumni is to be preferred over the perspective of current students.

Alumni-based studies traditionally have been directed primarily to the measurement of vocationally oriented cognitive outcomes. In recent years, however, it has been acknowledged that we should not limit alumni-based studies to the cognitive realm. As a result, affective outcomes have been the focus of a growing number of studies. This is particularly the case for those colleges which emphasize the liberal arts; researchers at these schools operate under the assumption that "many objectives of liberal education are phrased in a way that assume an integration within the individual of knowledge, value, and behavior,"[14] and this integration is best perceived when the students' perspective on their educational experiences has been allowed to mature.

AN APPLIED MODEL OF ALUMNI-BASED ASSESSMENT

Outcomes assessment for church-related liberal arts colleges presents a particular challenge. Students choose to attend these schools not so much for the cognitive development which can take place there, and which they fully expect to take place;

they enroll, rather, because of the possibilities for affective development which are here available. Students can learn the complexities of computer science, physics, literature, art, history, psychology, etc. on any college campus. But not all colleges have the environment for nor claim to produce the many affective outcomes that church-related colleges assume.

A review of the statements of philosophy which church-related colleges print in their catalogs confirms that these colleges maintain, in theory at least, a significant emphasis on the affective development of their students. If this is the case, then these colleges bear the responsibility for excellence in the affective components of development as well as the cognitive.

Since 1985 I have collaborated in an assessment project with a group of thirteen private liberal arts colleges, each with an enrollment of less than 2500 students, and each with an historic and present commitment to education within a church-related context. Though geographically distributed throughout the United States, these are generally regional colleges, with most students on each campus coming from states contiguous to that in which the college is located. The colleges have undertaken various collaborative efforts in recent years through a consortium they established in the late 1960s.

While the thirteen colleges in this study affirm their commitment to the affective formation of their students, very little formal research has been undertaken on these campuses to determine the extent to which they actually cultivate for their students the affective domain. Prior to the present study these colleges generally relied on

anecdotal tradition to explain to their constituencies, and to themselves, the success which they achieved in the affective formation of students.

For the present study, an assessment instrument was designed based principally on the statements of philosophy presented by the colleges in their respective academic catalogs. While many of these colleges have developed other documents which specify more extensively the nature of the expected outcomes, these statements of philosophy served as the common ground between the colleges. Had the instrument been designed for a single institution, the associated documents pertinent to a specific college may well have provided a more extensive basis upon which to develop an assessment instrument.

The assessment instrument for this study contained a series of twenty-eight statements, each set forth in response to a single question, "In thinking back to your undergraduate education at this college, to what extent do you think you were influenced in each of the following areas?" For each statement the respondents selected one of four levels of perceived influence, ranging from none to very much. While no systematic attempt is made in the individual college statements of philosophy to define clearly developed affective constructs, each of the twenty-eight statements, as developed for the assessment instrument, was designated as a component of one of five affective developmental areas. These five areas included statements relating to aesthetic development, moral development, personal development, social development, and spiritual development.

The instrument was designed to be administered by mail. This method was preferred over other options (e.g., telephone interviews and in-person interviews) as it provides an acceptable response rate with high quality responses at a moderate cost. Alumni from these colleges are presently living in all fifty states and several foreign countries. As such, in-person interviews would have been very costly and time consuming. Telephone interviews could have been conducted, but while these would have assured a higher response rate, there is a higher potential for bias in the responses received.[15]

The alumni included in this assessment project were those who were members of the five year anniversary class. This class was selected for two reasons. First, it was assumed that the perceptions of graduates would most accurately reflect the influence of the college when they had lived away from the college environment for some extended period of time, providing them with an opportunity to gain a moderately detached perspective on their undergraduate experience. Second, while it may be argued that an even greater time-span is needed to provide for a more matured perspective on one's undergraduate experience (hence a ten or fifteen year anniversary class should be surveyed), this would have proven, in the end, to be a detriment to this study as most of the participating schools have changed significantly over the recent ten to fifteen years.

Three years following the first administration of this assessment project, a subsequent distribution of the instrument was made to the graduating class which was then celebrating its fifth anniversary. In these two administrations of the project, over

6000 alumni have been contacted, with nearly 3300 respondents, for a response rate of over 55 percent. Plans are in place for a third administration of the study, providing a longitudinal context spanning three graduating classes, each separated by three years.

Response data were analyzed in a variety of ways. Statements were associated in developmental areas, and response means were analyzed accordingly. Various comparative groups were also used, including male and female alumni, alumni who had attended the college for four years and those who had transferred from another institution, and alumni who had resided in on-campus housing and those who had commuted to the campus. These analyses were accomplished for data from each college and for all respondents collectively. In addition, following the second administration of the study, the data were analyzed on a longitudinal basis to determine the manner in and extent to which the perceptions of alumni, both collectively and for individual colleges, differed between the two classes.

An alumni assessment effort of this nature could be effectively transferred to any college. If this were the case, several modifications to the procedure should be considered. Among these are the following.

First, the assessment instrument could be designed in a way which more accurately reflects the particularities of the individual campus. Statements reflecting the intentional outcomes of the particular school would be an essential component of the instrument. The faculty to which I belong, for example, has recently adopted a statement of College-Wide Educational Objectives which are to be the guiding principles upon which both curricular and co-curricular programming will be initiated

and reviewed in the forthcoming years. The objectives delineated in this statement include both cognitive and affective outcomes, as this is the educational tradition upon which this college was established. The specific objectives included in this statement should serve as the basis for any future assessment effort. Second, a means other than a mailed instrument might be appropriated. Telephone contact with a random sample of alumni in a given graduating class could obtain a high response rate. Such an effort could be accomplished at a moderate cost, particularly if the college has a large commuter population, the graduates of which may have generally remained in the local area. The gathering of responses by telephone would, of course, be dependent on the availability of appropriate telephone numbers, and special care would need to be taken to guard against the potential for bias which exists in this context.

Finally, the comprehensive nature of the assessment effort would be diminished, as there would be no basis of comparison with other like schools. The lack of comparative data could be modified, however, if the instrument administered were associated with an established assessment project, such as the NCHEMS/College Board Student Outcomes Information Service or the ACT Evaluation Survey Service. Both of these are designed, in part, to measure affective outcomes, have instruments available for administration to alumni, and provide for the addition of local questions to the standardized questionnaire. This would provide a basis for some comparison, although it would still be limited to those items on the national instrument, and would not achieve a comparison on local additions.

A CONCLUDING ASSERTION

All colleges are, to varying degrees, concerned with the development of their students. The intellectual/cognitive development of the college student has been the basis for significant assessment in the past, and this type of study will and should be continued in the future. Yet the very nature of such assessment suggests that the cognitive domain is the most, if not the only, significant aspect of the development of students. To study the cognitive development of students, however, while ignoring their affective development fails to assess a major component in the objectives of higher education. Likewise, to study the affective domain and ignore the cognitive is equally inadequate. We must not concentrate on one and ignore the other.

As educators, we should measure outcomes through both current students and alumni. I have maintained herein that current students should continue to be the basis upon which we measure cognitive outcomes. Historically, the study of alumni has been limited to either assessing the level of persistence of selected cognitive outcomes or to measuring a small number of vocationally oriented affective outcomes. The thesis of this paper asserts that affective outcomes should be increasingly measured by institutions of higher learning and that the perceptions of alumni are an important aspect of this assessment.

Analysis of data received via alumni-based research can provide valuable information useful to the improvement of a college's program, both curricular and otherwise. At most colleges few attempts are undertaken to ask graduates how they perceive their undergraduate experiences to have influenced their lives. Surely colleges

have a responsibility to their graduates even after the last tuition payment has been made or the diploma has been presented. A continued effort at measuring the perceptions of alumni shows them that they are still a valued constituent for the college and permits current students to benefit from the insights gathered via such study.

ENDNOTES

1. Peter Ewell, "Assessment: What's It All About?" Change, Vol. 17, No. 6 (November/December 1985), 32.

2. Alexander W. Astin. Four Critical Years (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977), p. 8.

3. Alexander W. Astin, "The Measured Effects of Higher Education," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, 404 (1972), p. 3.

4. Peter Ewell, The Self-Regarding Institution: Information for Excellence (Boulder: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 1984), pp. 31ff.

5. Howard Bowen, Investment in Learning: The Individual and Social Value in American Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977), p. 432.

6. Howard Bowen, Investment in Learning, p. 434.

7. Kenneth A. Feldman, Research Strategies in Studying College Impact (ACT Research Report, No. 34, Iowa City: American College Testing Program, 1970), p. 2.

8. See Ernest T. Pascarella, "Are Value-Added Analyses Valuable," in Assessing the Outcomes of Higher Education (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1987), p. 76.

9. Kenneth A. Feldman and Theodore M. Newcomb, The Impact of College Students--Volume I: An Analysis of Four Decades of Research (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1969).

10. Robert C. Pace, Measuring Outcomes of College: Fifty Years of Findings and Recommendations for the Future (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1979).

11. See Robert Pace, Measuring Quality of Effort: A New Dimension for Understanding Student Learning and Development (Los Angeles: Laboratory for Research on Higher Education, University of California at Los Angeles, 1979), and Peter Ewell, Information on Student Outcomes: How to Get It and How to Use It (Boulder: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 1983).

12. Peter Ewell, Information on Student Outcomes, p. 23.

13. Pace, Measuring Outcomes of College, p. 112.

14. Pace, Measuring Outcomes of College, p. 44.

15. See Mike Stevenson, R. Dan Wallein, and Saundra M. Jopely, "Designing Follow-Up Studies of Graduates and Former Students," in Assessing Educational Outcomes, ed. by Peter T. Ewell (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1985), who affirm the use of mailed instruments because they require only a modest budget, allow for a moderate level of complexity, obtain very accurate responses, and have a low potential for bias.